'Typing tutor' hits the right keys

BUSINESS TOOLS

Hillel Segal

There are lots of programs that claim to teach how to type or improve typing skills. So many, in fact, that it makes choosing one a bit like reaching into a grab bag.

I recently discovered a "typing tutor" program for the IBM compatible personal computer that isn't deathly dull or insulting to your intelligence. It's called Typing Instructor Encore, manufactured by Individual Software Inc., 125 Shoreway Road, San Carlos, Calif., (800) 331-3313. It costs $39.95.

Typing Instructor Encore's real success lies in its versatility. It's suitable for an already accomplished typist — such as someone in your office who could use it to sharpen existing skills for speed and accuracy — or for a complete novice, such as a student who needs to type school work or is just learning how to use a personal computer.

Even though the program comes with a brief, easy-to-understand instruction booklet, it has so many menus and help features built in that you never need to consult the manual. Here are some of the features I particularly liked:

■ The Keyboard Lessons are basic stuff, but they can be used equally well by a beginner or an experienced typist who has gotten sloppy. There are 18 lessons, including the numeric keypad. You have the choice of learning to use either the numbers on the top at the keyboard or the ones usually found on the right side of most PC keyboards.

■ After you finish any of the lessons, there are a series of tests you can take to measure your progress. The tests are challenging and fun. In addition, you can create your own text and use it as a test.

■ One whole section of the program records your progress, listing accuracy and speed and an analysis of those features by key and finger.

■ The best feature on this program is the Lobster Sea Adventure, a typing game complete with sound effects. You set the speed and the difficulty, and the object is to type lines of witticisms fast enough and accurately enough so the red lobster doesn't gobble up your work.

There is one optional extra-cost feature, however, that I wasn't excited about.

The manufacturer also offers special Type 'N' Discover disks, each costing $6.95, which supposedly provide some interesting material with which to practice your typing. The topics are business, law, entertainment, history, literature and sports.

I found, however, that typing a passage from J.D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" was more boring than six runs of "the quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog." And when I did hit on an item that was interesting, I just wanted to read it, not type it.

But for some people, these lessons may be just the thing they need to keep them interested in practicing their typing.

Two other typing programs I tried and wasn't enamored with are Keyboard Master for $19.95 from PowerUp!, (800) 851-2917; and Choice Software's Typist for $62.95, (801) 292-7900.

■ The bottom line: I know there are many other typing programs available, too, but so far I haven't seen any that could hold a candle to Typing Instructor Encore. Its variety, challenge and versatility make it suitable and interesting for just about any user.

Hillel Segal's column includes evaluations of gadgets, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity. Segal is a management consultant based in Boulder.